

# THE SUSTAINABLE BUILDING ADVISOR PROGRAM



A Local Utility Joins with a  
Community College to Stay Ahead  
of the Sustainability Curve

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## A Case Study

A group of professional students including architects, developers, contractors, public utility workers, engineers, facilities managers, environmental consultants and others meet monthly. They enter the classroom, and bring out thick binders with vital information on all aspects of environmental sustainability related to commercial and residential buildings. Today, they will be listening to an expert on water-recycling. The very next day they will take what they have learned out into the field, so that they can apply the methodology learned in the classroom, to a real live situation. In spite of the two-day rigorous schedule their enthusiasm appears boundless, as they fully engage in the learning process from beginning to end.

This scene is repeated one weekend a month for the next several months until they cover all the topics included in now a five-year old project called the “Sustainable Building Advisor Program – a project gaining in national prominence.

The first of its kind, this program, which brings together the various elements of environmental sustainability, was launched in 1998 when Seattle City Light and Seattle Central Community College initially submitted a joint proposal to design an environmental curriculum program. The proposal wasn’t funded but the excitement for its potential prompted both to consider offering it on a trial basis without funding.

Seattle City Light’s Director of Conservation, Marya Castellano, expressed it best when she said, “Our City has always been at the forefront of the environmental sustainability effort but we wanted to do more. We realized we couldn’t expand our efforts without having more professionals involved, so we developed an innovative, comprehensive training package to assist them.”



The course was to cover energy, site and transportation, water, indoor air quality, and materials using a thorough but practical emphasis. Using the framework of a weekly evening format, guest instructors, primarily practicing professionals considered the best in the region, delivered the content.

The very first year, the project enrolled 35 students, almost double what was anticipated given the registration fee. An end-of-the-year evaluation resulted in some changes, including even greater emphasis on practical application.

Kathleen O'Brien, one of the guest presenters in the program's inaugural year and principal of O'Brien & Company, was selected to be the lead instructor for ensuing years and to implement changes resulting from the first year program evaluation. She re-structured the topics, worked with guest presenters to help them standardize their presentations and devised a new schedule, one week-end per month for nine months. The most important change was to require participation in a team project, where students would apply principles of sustainability to analyze a

real project, write papers, and create a final team presentation. The final presentations have been an opportunity for students to really let their creative juices flow; formats have included skits (complete with original music), "quiz shows", as well as the more conventional power point.

So unusual and popular is the training program, that calls from all over the US and the world have been received, with some students enrolling even though they have to travel hundreds of miles by air or by car to attend the monthly sessions. A group in Ireland has also been given the training.

How do the students feel about the training? Lisa Rosenow, a mechanical engineer with Coffman Engineers of Seattle Washington, took the course in 2002. She reports that "Since taking this course, I have been asked to take leadership roles in my firm that I never expected at this point in my professional career. It's been an exciting year!" At an information meeting for new student prospects, Lisa also passed along her boss' comment that "it was the best investment the firm's ever made." Lisa and other past

students' enthusiasm for the course is contagious. The course is generally sold out before the early registration date even arrives.

Many program graduates have felt so strongly about its content and rigor they requested permission to use some type of designation, such as the letters "S.B.A. (for Sustainable Building Advisor)" after their names on their business cards.

In response, the founders have worked diligently to create a national organization with an online examination and are now distributing the program to other colleges and utilities in other parts of the USA. A national panel of experts will be reviewing the curriculum on a regular basis.

And as this is taking place, Seattle City Light and Seattle Central Community College continue to enroll 30-35 students each year. It's clear, the class represents to working professionals, the opportunity to stay ahead of the curve themselves and to help Seattle and the Puget Sound region retain its environmentally sustainable status for decades to come.